

Airstrike kills al-Qaida chief

Vt. experts hail victory, offer words of caution

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BENNINGTON — The death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq who orchestrated a brutal insurgency that included bombings, kidnappings and beheadings, was hailed as a victory yesterday by local experts.

"I think it's a splendid operation," said Derek Boothby, who served as chairman of the Iraq Operation Group of the United Nations from June 2004 to October 2005 and oversaw Iraq's first free elections.

"It's going to be a major morale blow to the insurgents, and it's going to be a major morale boost for the coalition troops and Iraqi government," Boothby said from Manchester.

Boothby began work at the United Nations in 1978 and performed weapons inspections in Iraq in 1991 and 1992. He said he understood that al-Zarqawi's death may breed more terrorist activities and acts of revenge. Boothby urged caution.

"On the other side, we must be careful not to become overconfident and expect the situation to be peaceful," he said. "There's bound to be some kind of reaction. We're still needed there to continue to make progress toward stability and, we hope, peace."

Shaftsbury resident Chuck Bushey served as a military intelligence officer in Vietnam before retiring in 1977. He said he was so pleased with the morning headlines of al-Zarqawi's death that he e-mailed all of his friends from his days in the Marine Corps to spread what he called "good news."

"It was a pleasant way to start the day knowing that he was gone," he said. "I think there will be those affiliated with al-Qaida who say he's a martyr. But the message it delivers to those involved in terrorism is that eventually they're going to get caught."

Regarding al-Zarqawi's potential martyr status, Bushey seems to have hit the mark. "We anticipated that he would be killed for a very long time," al-Zarqawi's brother, Sayel al-Khalayleh told the Associated Press in a phone interview. "We expected that he would be martyred. We hope that he will join other martyrs in heaven."

The AP also reported that Sayel al-Khalayleh was one of 57 family members who signed a newspaper ad disavowing al-Zarqawi after November suicide bombings in Amman, Jordan killed 63 people. The bombings were carried out by men linked to al-Zarqawi.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., said al-Zarqawi's death was "a relief to our entire nation."

"We all know that this in itself will not end the violence or resolve the complex and dangerous difficulties that remain in Iraq, but this is a murderous terrorist whose personal reign of terror has been brought to a just end," he said in a statement.

Sen. James Jeffords, I-VT, released a statement reiterating that the death of al-Zarqawi is not the death of the insurgency.

"It is far too early to know what his death will mean to the future stability of Iraq," Jeffords said. "Unfortunately, we continue to see bombings and other senseless acts of violence that illustrate the daunting challenges that remain in the region. I am pleased that al-Zarqawi will no longer be inciting violence, but I fear the hatred he has unleashed will be with us for some time to come."

Congressman Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., said the killing is "a very positive development."

"The U.S. military deserves great credit for tracking down this murderer," Sanders said in a statement. "However, it would be a mistake to assume that violence in Iraq will recede because of this. ... In my view, the president must develop a concrete plan as to when the Iraqi government will assume control of military operations and when our troops are coming home."

Evan Lehmann of the Banner's Washington Bureau contributed to this report.